



### Safeguarding an Endangered Species

In the 1940's the only existing wild flock of Whooping Cranes was reduced to 15 birds. This flock has rebounded to around 250 birds today and still migrates between Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park and their traditional wintering grounds in Texas at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

Scientists recognize the risk of having all of the wild whooping cranes concentrated in one small area. The population could be wiped out by disease, weather events, or human impacts. Whooping crane survival depends on additional, separate populations.



Operation Migration (OM) proudly joined forces with several government and non-profit organizations to form the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP). Under the umbrella of WCEP, these organizations work together to safeguard the rarest crane in the world.

### Costume and Isolation Reared

Using captive-hatched birds from breeding centers throughout North America, OM rears and trains Whooping Crane chicks to accept and follow its small aircraft. Imprinting begins while the chicks are still inside their eggs by exposing them to aircraft sounds.



Once hatched the young chicks are reared in total isolation from humans. To ensure the impressionable cranes remain wild, biologists and pilots adhere to a strict no-talking rule and wear large white costumes designed to disguise the human form.



At around 50 days of age the young birds are transported to Wisconsin. There, as the young birds mature to fledglings, the OM team conditions them to follow their surrogate parents (the costumed pilots and aircraft) into the air. Flight training and conditioning continue until they have sufficient strength and stamina to be led south on their first migration.

### Aircraft-guided Migration

Each Year since 2001 Operation Migration has led a cohort of Whooping Crane chicks on their first migration south. Relying on the generosity of people to fund and host the expedition, the migration team works its way south in weather dependent jumps of up to 100 miles a day.



At predetermined stopover locations the birds are kept isolated in portable pens to protect them from predators. They are released in the early dawn and take off behind the aircraft. As the birds fly on the vortices of the aircraft wingtips the ground crew packs up the vehicles and equipment and follows by road.

Once in Florida the chicks are allowed to freely come and go from the pen as they grow comfortable with living wild in the marsh. In early spring the now sub-adult birds initiate an unassisted return migration to central Wisconsin where they fledged. Eventually, they will teach the migration route to their offspring.

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***Operation Migration relies on public support to make our work possible.***

***To learn more visit: <http://operationmigration.org/InTheField>***